



By Chuck Williams and Lily Gordon
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U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop told more than 530 people at a town hall meeting he had not made up his mind on how he would vote on health care reform legislation.

"My vote doesn't belong to Nancy Pelosi and it doesn't belong to Barack Obama," the eight-term Georgia Democrat said during sharp questioning from many people with concerns about sweeping reform under consideration in Congress that would overhaul the nation's health care delivery system. "It belongs to the people in the second district of Georgia."

Wednesday morning amid heavy security, it was Bishop's turn to face voters as the national debate on health care reform intensifies.

Columbus resident Junie Christian was one of those gathered at the National Infantry Museum and Soldier Center.

"Are we going to hear health care or ideology?" he said just before it started.

The next three-plus hours were a mixture of both.

Bishop, closely aligned with President Obama as his Georgia campaign co-chairman a year ago, tried to avoid the shouting matches that were made-for-television scenes at other town hall meetings across the country.

In a calm, measured voice and almost without interruption, the congressman addressed his constituents for about 45 minutes. His practiced speech touched upon many of the features outlined in the bill to include coverage and choice, affordability, shared responsibility, controlling costs, work force investments and prevention and wellness.

He summarized the five health care reform bills that are currently in the U.S. House. Versions of the bill were available on the chairs as people entered the hall. When specific parts of the bill were discussed, the passages were put on a large screen.

"I think there were some lessons learned that some others did not have copies of the bill on hand," Bishop said.

The congressman spent more than two hours fielding questions from about two dozen people.

"It was a lot calmer than the ones we have seen on TV," said Columbus Homeland Security Director Brad Hicks. "It's about what we expected."

There were about 40 law enforcement and security personnel at the meeting from the Columbus Police Department, Muscogee County Sheriff's Office, Muscogee County Marshal's Office and museum security staff.

Things never got out of hand, but Bishop did face intense questioning.

Vandy Middleton, a 34-year-old stay-at-home mom who lives in Midtown Columbus, asked Rep. Sanford Bishop what he was against in the health care bill.

"When people have spoken in opposition, you seem to defend the bill," Middleton said. "What are you opposed to?"

Bishop outlined several concerns in the legislation.

"I am concerned about how it will impact small businesses," he said.

He pointed out there are more than 100,000 small businesses in his district, which stretches from South Columbus to the Florida line and takes in all or parts of more than 30 southwest Georgia counties.

He said he had questions about how health care cooperatives — similar to utility cooperatives or banking credit unions — would work.

"I am not certain that cooperatives would be equally as good as the public option," Bishop said.

The public option, which has been a point of contention, would open up insurance to the nearly 46 million uninsured citizens.

Public option

After the meeting, Bishop said he would like to see the public option in the final product, but acknowledged it could be lost in the shuffle of compromise.

"I have no problem with the public option," he said. "But I believe in the best interest of bipartisanship there has to be a consensus."

Bret Crumpton, a 45-year-old Columbus eye surgeon, was one of the first to speak against the bill. But first he wanted to thank Bishop and the other "Blue Dog" Democrats for slowing down the rush to a vote on the health care bill.

The "Blue Dogs," about 50 moderate and conservative House Democrats, were instrumental in keeping the bill from going to a vote before the August recess.

Bishop acknowledged the role the “Blue Dogs” have played.

“I think it is a blessing that we have been able to bring focus to the debate — and to help bring the House of Representatives more to the center,” he said.

Crumpton never swayed in his opposition.

“Reform should not be synonymous with government-run,” the surgeon said. “This is nothing but a big-government takeover.”

Crumpton then pointed out that the Medical Association of Georgia, of which he is a member, didn’t support the reform though it has been endorsed by the American Medical Association.

“I am familiar that the Medical Association of Georgia doesn’t support this,” Bishop said. “But the Medical Association of Georgia is an insurance company.”

Some of those watching wondered if those firing the questions at Bishop lived in the district.

“The thing that concerns me is, is he really talking to his constituents?” said state Rep. Carolyn Hugley. “Are these people really from the second district?”

The meeting site was at the northern edge of Bishop’s sprawling district. The congressman said it did not matter if those asking questions lived in his district or not.

“Good ideas about health care can originate in Alabama, they can originate in Georgia,” Bishop said.

Not everyone left happy — or with the answers they came to get.

Gretchen Timmons, a 33-year-old fitness professional who lives on Fort Benning, asked Bishop how the plan would be funded.

“How are we going to pay for this?” she asked. “Who’s getting taxed?”

As Bishop attempted to answer the question, someone in the crowd shouted, “Answer the question.”

Bishop paused, then resumed his answer. He finished by saying, “The money is going to come from tax revenue from a booming economy and from savings from fraud, waste and abuse.”

It did not satisfy Timmons.

“He gave a nice eloquent answer, but it was not the answer to my question,” Timmons said afterward.

The meeting was Bishop’s first of four in two days. He also held one Wednesday afternoon in

Fort Valley. Today, he is scheduled to hold forums in the southern part of the district in Bainbridge and Albany.

After the Columbus meeting, Bishop reaffirmed his stance on the legislation.

"I don't know what we are voting on," he said. "There are several different proposals. The Senate bill has not yet been written. The House bill hasn't gone through the process."